

Our Time is So Brief by TreenBeen

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Summary: She touched their lives so briefly, yet she meant so much. Mike, Hopper, and Joyce and what their moments with Eleven meant to them, and what they meant to her in turn. "Far too often, touch meant pain. It meant force, and anger, and being left alone in the dark until her throat burned from crying out and her eyes ached with tears. But Mike had never hurt her. "

Our Time is So Brief

The van soared over their heads and Mike could not help but watch, mouth open, in awe. She was so powerful. She was so brave. She was so good. She was safe.

He pedaled harder, faster, because they had to get away. They had to get away from these men, to get El away from these men who wanted to hurt them, to hurt *her* and he wasn't going to let that happen, so he forced his legs to work harder still. The bike wavered beneath him and he used all his strength to keep it upright. El sagged against him.

He risked a glance back at her as they sped off, watched her wipe the stream of crimson from under her nose with the edge of a dirty sleeve.

"You ok?" he said, watching her with worried eyes. He knew how her powers exhausted her.

She smiled softly, a toothless smile that lit up her eyes. "Ok," she repeated back to him, and he knew she meant it. For now, they were alright. Now they needed a plan. They had to find Will. They had to keep El safe. He hoped they could do both.

He nearly did a double take when he saw her, because in the bright light streaming through the bus window, with her dress rumpled and her hair so short, he saw Sarah and he hoped. God knew what that lab was capable of...

She was so small. She was covered in dust from the road and she crouched behind the Wheeler boy and stared at him with wide eyes, shining bright with fear and confusion but hardening with determination.

He blinked. There wasn't time for this now. He couldn't lose himself in memories of his girl, of what might have been... of a different time, and a different bus, one that might have taken her to school after he dropped her at the bus stop. STOP. There *wasn't* time for this.

"Alright... let's go." She stared at him, mouth opening slightly as she composed herself, and he saw Sarah gasping for air. The boys gaped at him. His entrance had shocked the kids, he knew. "Let's go!" He said, more insistently, and they scurried to follow, pressing him with questions.

She never spoke. She watched him warily, and he tried to gentle his movements, to put her more at ease. She stayed close to the Wheeler boy.

His thoughts were on Sarah. But this was Jane. This was Eleven, or so he was informed by Mike. And she was their last shot at finding Will so that Joyce would never know the pain of losing a child, like he did.

Eleven was murmuring. Joyce could only just make out the words at first, but soon the child was screaming, her cries echoing in the dimly lit gymnasium as she voiced her terror. Gone...*gone*...

Joyce felt her own distress growing with the child's. She gently held El's arms with her hands, and the girl gripped her sleeve desperately, her only lifeline to this world as she ventured alone into the dark.

"It's ok," she soothed, gently. "It's ok, I'm right here with you. I'm right here. I got you." She wasn't sure if the words were for Eleven, or for Will, for herself, or for the other children sitting around the pool with them. She wasn't sure if her son was ok, where he was, if she could save him, but this little girl was her best chance.

El whimpered, sloshing water as she desperately clutched onto Joyce and Hopper.

"It's ok. You're safe."

She stilled, relaxing as Joyce repeated the words like a prayer, again and again into the quiet and the dark. Joyce squeezed her hand gently. She was so small. She was so brave. She was so selfless, this little girl who knew none of them, owed them nothing yet risked everything for them. For her. For Will.

"You're ok, honey." El's head turned towards her, as though she sought physical comfort from her words. She whimpered again, two words escaping:

"Castle Byers." Joyce gasped, holding tighter still to her hand as tears filled her own eyes, both for the child in front of her and the one she had lost a week prior. She continued speaking, guiding Eleven with her voice and reassuring her son, herself, as she spoke. And then she heard Will.

With one word, her hope was restored. Her son was still out there. He was still alive. And she had this little girl to thank for that hope. She held El's head afloat, stroking her short hair gently as she blinked back her tears. The sounds of El's distress increased on the radio. Joyce turned towards it just as El suddenly sat up, out of the water, whimpering and on the verge of tears, throwing off the impromptu mask they had made her and desperately seeking the comfort of familiar faces.

Joyce immediately wrapped her arms around her, holding her close to her chest and reassuring her that she had done well. She had found Will. She had braved the dark, alone... for Will.

And Joyce couldn't mother her own child right now, but she could mother this one. So she held El tightly as she cried, and rocked her gently until she calmed, because this little girl, in that moment, meant the world.

She was taken aback by his touch.

No one had ever touched her like this, with their lips to hers, so fearless in the face of her oddity.

Will's mother had held her close after she entered the darkness in her mind to find Will, had held her arms and whispered comfort to her. The safety man had held her hand as she floated in the water, senses dull to all in this world as she sought the missing people in the next. Dustin had picked her up, carried her when she could not walk on her own, carried her to safety and away from the bad men after she had killed those in their path.

Papa had only ever stroked her short hair, and only when he was pleased with her for doing as she was told. Only when she found the right person, or impressed him with her strength. Only when the right people were dead and she had collapsed in the aftermath, exhausted and fighting to stay awake. Only when she deserved it. People only ever touched her when she deserved it.

This was different. She had not had to earn this touch from Mike. She had used her powers for him not because he made her, but because she wanted to help him. Mike, who was soft and kind and good. Mike, who gave her a soft place to sleep and Eggos. Mike, who kept her hidden and made her pretty. Mike, who was her friend. Was this what friends did?

Far too often, touch meant pain. It meant force, and anger, and being left alone in the dark until her throat burned from crying out and her eyes ached with tears. It meant the flexing of the tendons in Papa's hand as he led her to the tank for more work, the promise of fear and loneliness and the ever present possibility of disappointing him and being left again to the dark.

But Mike had never hurt her. Mike kept her safe, and she did the same for him. Mike called her pretty. Mike liked her hair, and her powers, and he talked to her. He explained things to her, things that were never explained to her before. He taught her, and he protected her, and he was her friend.

And Mike put his lips to hers and she let him, because he was her friend and she liked him.

And as she faced the beast, arm raised to keep it in place, to keep it away from Mike, she thought of him. His kindness, his home, his laugh, his kiss. And she smiled because he was safe.

"Goodbye, Mike."